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GOD

By

REV. FRANCIS J. RIPLEY

I BELIEVE IN GOD

How do *you* think of God? I do not mean of God made Man, Jesus Christ, Our Lord. It is easy enough to think of Him. I mean of God as God, existing for all eternity before He created anything. The great masters, whose works fill the world's art galleries, seem to have thought of God the Father as an old man with a beard, up in the sky, where the wind always seems strong enough to blow the beard about. You might think of God like that. Or you might think of His eternity like time doing a two-way stretch — going backwards and forwards through ages and ages yet never beginning and never ending. You might think of God as being so big that He not only fills all the space He has created but has no limits of any sort.

The truth is that we just cannot imagine God. Our little minds are imperfect and limited; God is perfect and unlimited. So we cannot comprehend Him for the same reason that we cannot put a ton of coal into a hundredweight bag.

HOW WE KNOW GOD

As Catholics we are bound to believe that *God, our Creator and Lord, can be known with certainty by the natural light of reason from created things*. I am not going to give you here the proofs that there is a God. Fr Redmond has done that magnificently elsewhere.¹ I just want to help you to know a little more about God, because the more you know Him the more you will love Him.

¹ *The Existence of God*, by Rev. R. P. Redmond D.D. (C.T.S. 6d.)

The Book of Wisdom tells us that 'by the greatness of the beauty and of the creature, the creator of them can be seen' (Wis. 13:5). St Paul said there can be no excuse for those who live like atheists: since the world began, God's invisible attributes, for example His eternal power and divinity, have been plainly discernible through things which He has made and which everybody sees and knows, so men who live godless and evil lives are without the rag of an excuse (*cf.* Rom. 1:20). The pagans had not the revelation God gave the Jews, but by their conduct they showed that God had written His law in their hearts (Rom. 2:15).

From this we gather that, without any supernatural revelation, the essentials of the law of the Old Testament are known to heathens. There is a law in their hearts – and that means that there is a supreme Lawgiver. It is so easy for men to know of God's existence from the things about them that some people, amongst them even Catholic theologians, have mistakenly concluded that the idea of God is inborn and not acquired from experience.

In the oath which the Church requires people in certain positions to take against the heresy of Modernism² there is a statement that God's existence can formally be proved through reason by means of the principle of causality.

What do we mean by the principle of causality? This simple statement: What begins to be has a cause. That is the starting point of St Thomas' arguments for God's existence. They begin with first principles of reason; they proceed from certain facts, e.g. that nothing within the experience of man can be the cause of itself; they follow the accepted laws of reasoning; therefore, the conclusions are absolutely true. You would be justified in rejecting them only if you could prove that what is called a first principle is not such at all, or what is said to be a fact is not a fact, or if there is some breach of the laws of logic.

It would be against the Church's teaching to argue that our knowledge of God comes, not from natural reason, but from a

² 'The synthesis of all heresies' which destroyed many basic Catholic doctrines by trying to reconcile them with modern scientific thought and contending that they are merely products of the subconscious, developed under the stimulus of religious sense. It was condemned by St Pius X.

primitive revelation by God which has been handed down by tradition.

Agnostics and sceptics maintain that God cannot be known or His existence proved with certainty. Some of them say they believe in a supreme Being, but they 'just do not know'. There are too many degrees of these fashionable errors to describe here. The Church condemns them because they are diametrically opposed to the truth of Scripture, tradition and reason.

Can there be a convinced atheist? Yes, because we are members of a fallen race and it is always possible to yield to temptation. In theory and in his own mind a person may succeed in convincing himself that there is no God – but, note this, that does not excuse him. The Church has always taught that a man cannot really believe, *without blame*, that there is no God because, as St Paul taught, the proofs of God's existence are too obvious and elementary.

In a book called *The Faith, History and Practice of the Church of England* (an official correspondence course) Canon Eaton wrote this: 'Let us be quite clear at once that we cannot prove the existence of God; and it is no part of the duty of those who teach the Christian Faith to prove – in the strict sense of the word – the existence of God' (p.25). That is heresy. It follows the teaching of Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher who died in 1804 after he had decisively influenced Protestant theology to reject the rational foundation of religion, in favour of the idea that religious truths must be received not by reason but by feeling which demands God.

This has an important practical consequence. Clare Booth Luce explains it. When we are trying to explain our Faith to a Protestant she says we must remember:

'First, that where religion is concerned the average non-Catholic seldom uses his mind. Second, that the heart is the main organ with which he approaches questions of Faith. Third, that in order to make the non-Catholic bring his mind to bear on religious truth, the Catholic has not to use both mind and heart . . . To him (the non-Catholic) what feels right *is* right. What appeals to his emotions as true *is* true. His religion has become a throb in

his breast, a lump in his throat, a twinge of his conscience, a hunger of his spirit, but a vacuum in his head'. (*Bringing Souls to Christ*, pp.21-22.)

'I believe in God', we say in the Apostles' Creed. Theologians discuss whether one and the same person can at the same time have knowledge and faith in God's existence. St Bonaventure and St Albert the Great taught that he can; St Thomas Aquinas disagreed with them. But he did teach that the same person at the same time can know God naturally as the originator of the natural order but believe in Him supernaturally as the originator of the supernatural order. What is of Faith is that God's existence is not only something we know by reason but is also something we believe with supernatural faith. St Paul taught that without faith it is impossible to please God and that before we approach Him we must have faith in two things – 'that He is; and that He is a rewarder to them that seek Him' (Heb. 11:6).

We do not know God in this world immediately, directly, without analysis or reasoning (apart from a special revelation); we know Him only through the medium of what He has created. St Paul said that God dwells in 'light inaccessible; whom no one hath seen nor can see' (1 Tim. 6:16). Moreover, when we think of God we can only do so by means of our natural ideas. We know that what is created must bear the stamp of the Maker. So we look around and see what God has made. 'Nobody can give what he has not got', we say, 'therefore, if I see any perfections in creatures I know God must have those perfections. In creatures they are limited; in God they have no limit.' On the other hand, if I find any blemishes in created things, I say: 'That cannot be in God because He is infinite perfection. For example, there can be no limits in God and no parts.' We must never forget that the gap between our human ideas and God is not only great, it cannot be measured; it is infinite. 'Say we much as we will, of what needs to be said our words come short; be this the sum of all our saying, He is in all things. To what end is all our boasting? He, the Almighty, is high above all that He has made; He, the Lord, is terrible and great beyond compare, and His power is wonderful. Glorify Him as best you may, glory is still lacking, such is the marvel of His greatness;

praise Him and extol Him as you will, He is beyond all praising; summon all your strength the better to exalt His name, untiring still, and you shall not reach your goal. Who can tell us what He is from sight seen of Him? Who can magnify His eternal being? Much more lies beyond our ken; only the fringe of creation meets our view; and of all things the Lord is maker' (Ecclus. 43:29-36).

We can never fully understand God: 'How incomprehensible are His judgments, and how unsearchable His ways' (Rom. 11:33). Only God knows God fully; for the infinite Being can be fully known only by an infinite intellect. Nevertheless, such knowledge as we have of God from what He has revealed and what we discover in His creation is true. God really possesses the perfections we say He has, even though we know Him only from comparison with created things. Our ideas of Him are infinitely less than the reality, but they are true. The blessed in heaven know God immediately, directly and supernaturally, but not fully. There is a boundless abyss between God and creation; even our Blessed Lady is a creature and, therefore, as Queen of Heaven she cannot fully comprehend the Godhead. She and the Saints do not have to reason about God as we do, but their ideas of Him are limited.

GOD'S NAME

If we cannot adequately comprehend the nature of God, we cannot find a perfect name for It. That is why the Fathers of the Church called Him 'inexpressible'. When the Bible seems to give names to God they apply primarily to Him as He is seen to be doing things. So, if it is describing God's relation to the world, it might call Him 'The Strong', 'The Powerful', 'The Lord', 'The Judge'. When it thinks rather in terms of God's perfections in His own Being it names Him 'The Mighty One', 'The Highest', 'The Holy'.

But God has one real name – *Jahweh*. It is the name He gave Himself when He spoke to Moses from the burning bush: 'I am who am' (Exod. 3:14). It means 'HE IS'. Our Lord claimed this

title when He said: 'Before Abraham came to be, I AM' (John 8:58). But He taught us to address God by that term of love, 'Our Father'.

That does not mean that when we contemplate God we should not think of Him as what He is, absolute Being or subsisting Being Itself. He is the reason for His existence; He cannot owe it to anything else. Existence tells us *that* a thing is, while nature tells us *what* a thing is. Creatures may or may not exist; God must exist; He cannot *not* exist. Creatures can have existence; God *is* existence. His nature commands existence; it is such that He must exist. You cannot separate God and His existence; He and His existence are identical. All other things exist because they receive existence. In many cases we know that from our own experience. It is not so with God. He does not receive existence, because He is existence. In Himself is the reason why He exists. He is BEING, perfect, limitless, infinite, subsistent Being. The philosophers had a Latin term for Him: *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. This distinguishes Him fundamentally from all creatures. At the same time, it is the root from which we rightly come to think about all the other perfections of the Godhead.

Let us think now about the attributes of God. We read about His absolute perfection, His infinity, His simplicity, His oneness, His truth, His goodness, His changelessness, His eternity, His immensity, and so on. Can we discover much about them?*

Attributes are properties. As we have seen, we can only think of God by comparing Him with creatures. St Paul says we know only in part (1 Cor. 13:9). All our concepts are inadequate. Using this imperfect way of thinking, we see these properties as belonging to God's Being. Really they *are* His Being, all of them, and they are identical with one another. It is an imperfection to be made of parts. In the words of St Augustine: 'What God has, that He is'. Yet, as we shall see, Holy Scripture vouches for many attributes in God; the distinction between them is not only in our minds. God is the primary author of the Bible; if He tells us that He has these attributes we must believe Him. He *is* Good, He *is*

*See also *Who is God*, by Mgr P. E. Hallett (C.T.S. 6d.). The reader will be helped if he has a Bible at hand and refers carefully to the texts indicated.

Love, and so on. These attributes are not just words all meaning the same thing. As St Thomas Aquinas wrote: 'If all names applied to God mean the same, we cannot properly say "Good God" or the like, and yet it is written, "O most mighty, great and powerful, the Lord of Hosts is thy name" (Jer. 32:18). These names spoken of God do not all mean the same . . . they indicate the divine substance, but in an imperfect way . . . they have diverse meanings. Although the names applied to God mean one *thing*, they mean that one thing under many and different aspects; therefore they do not all mean exactly the same.'

GOD IS PERFECT

God is absolutely perfect. What do we mean by perfection? Think of yourself: you are perfect if you lack nothing which you, a human being, should possess. There is a standard by which your perfection is judged. Your perfection is *relative* to it. In contrast to this is *absolute* perfection which unites in itself every possible perfection and excludes every possible deficiency. Our Lord said, 'Your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt. 5:48). The Bible tells us that God is entirely self-sufficient and independent of all other substances; therefore He is perfect. So, 'Who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counsellor? Or who hath first given to Him, and recompense shall be made to him? For of Him, and by Him, and in Him are all things' (Rom. 11:34-35). Also, that He possesses all perfections: 'He is all' (Ecclus. 43:29 . . . Is. 40:13). Christian writers through the ages base God's absolute perfection on the infinite fullness of His being. St Thomas says that, as the first Cause of all created things, He virtually contains in Himself all their perfection: He includes in Himself every being and every perfection.

God is actually infinite in every perfection. The infinite has no end nor bound. There is nothing which can limit or bound perfect being. So, to quote St Gregory of Nyssa, God is 'in every way without limit'. 'Of His wisdom there is no measure; of His greatness there is no end' (Ps. 146:5; 144:3).

GOD IS INDIVISIBLE

God is absolutely simple. Simplicity here has a technical meaning – that which is not made of parts, composed, or divisible. God is a pure Spirit; He has no body nor a composition of body and spirit. The Old Testament speaks of God in a human way, as if He had a body, but it asserts that He is the supreme Ruler over matter (Is. 40:18). The New Testament asserts simply, ‘God is a spirit’ (John 4:24), and ‘The Lord is a spirit’ (2 Cor. 3:17).

The Nicene Creed teaches that *there is only one God*. It is a basic doctrine of the Old Testament and the New, repeated so often that it is necessary to quote only a few of the more obvious texts:

‘The Lord He is God in heaven above, and in the earth beneath, and there is no other’ (Deut. 4:39).

‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord’ (Deut. 6:4).

‘There is no other God but Thou’ (Wis. 12:13).

‘Jesus answered him: The first commandment of all is, Hear, O Israel; the Lord thy God is one God’ (Mk. 12:29).

‘There is no God but one’ (1 Cor. 8:4).

‘One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in us all’ (Eph. 4:6).

‘There is one God’ (1 Tim. 2:5).

GOD IS TRUTH

God’s Being is Truth in the sense that He alone, being the sole infinite Being, corresponds to the idea of God. ‘The Lord is the true God’ (Jer. 10:10). Our Lord’s definition of eternal life was that ‘they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent’ (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9) (Jn. 17:3).

God’s power of knowledge is infinite. This is another aspect of His truth. In Him there is infinitely perfect agreement between thought and things. He knows His own divine being; in that way He knows all created things in their origin. He who knows (God)

is identical with what He knows (God) and with the act of knowing (God). So there can be no error in Him; He can neither deceive nor be deceived.

‘Of His wisdom there is no end’ (Ps. 146:5).

‘He knoweth the secrets of the heart’ (Ps. 43:22).

‘The Lord knoweth the thoughts of men’ (Ps. 93:11).

You will remember the beautiful passage from the beginning of the 138th Psalm:

‘Lord, Thou searchest me and knowest me; Thou knowest me when I sit down and when I rise up. Thou discernest my thoughts from afar; when I walk and when I lie down Thou dost behold and Thou givest heed to all my ways. When a word is not yet on my tongue, behold, O Lord, Thou knowest all. From behind and from before Thou dost understand me, and Thou layest Thy hand upon me. Thy knowledge is too wonderful and sublime for me: I cannot grasp it’ (vv. 1–6).

The whole psalm is a beautiful meditation on God’s knowledge, omnipresence and power.

Truth includes *veracity*, that is, agreement of what one says with what is in one’s mind. The Holy Spirit thought it necessary to emphasize that God cannot be responsible for untruth. Our Lord told the Jews: ‘He that sent me is true: and the things I have heard from Him, these same I speak to the world’ (Jn. 8:26). To Titus St Paul wrote of ‘God who lieth not’ (1:2). ‘It is impossible for God to lie’, says the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 6:18).

Another aspect of truth is *fidelity*. We are all only too familiar with the person who has high ideals but fails to live up to them or whose actions are not in accordance with his fine protestations. Faithfulness means agreement of action with speech. In God it is absolutely perfect. ‘The Lord is faithful in all His works’ (Ps. 144:13). If we play God false, St Paul says, ‘He continueth faithful’ because He cannot deny His own nature (2 Tim. 2:13). Our Lord, God incarnate, claimed the same fidelity: ‘Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away’ (Matt 24:35), ‘Heaven’ meaning simply the firmament.

GOD IS GOODNESS

God is absolute Goodness in Himself and in relation to others. He is all good, the origin of all created things and all created goodness. As is the case with all the attributes we are considering, there is an unbridgeable, infinite gap between created goodness and God. His Being, and only His, is goodness without limit: 'None is good but God alone' (Lk. 18:9). The goodness of creatures is given to them by the Creator: 'Every creature of God is good' (1 Tim. 4:4). When we think of God knowing His own goodness, which is Himself, and loving it, we see how the Fathers came to write so often of the infinite bliss of God as He enjoys the possession of Himself.

Holiness is moral goodness or goodness of behaviour. It seems impudent to speak of this in connection with God, for He is not merely holy (as an adjective), but holiness (as a substance). His will is the ultimate standard, the final criterion, of all behaviour. He is intrinsically, by His very Being, incapable of wrongdoing. 'God is faithful and without any iniquity' (Deut. 32:4) (*cf.* Pss. 5:5; 76:14; 70:22; 77:41, etc.).

We may even think of God's kindness. He has overwhelmed all His creation with countless proofs of kindness. By creating things He enables them to share in His goodness; He proves His goodness, too, by preserving what He has made, governing everything by His providence, redeeming those who would otherwise have been lost for ever and going to endless lengths, even dying in torment, to make men holy. Our Lord emphasized all this so often in His instructions. Remember His words in the Sermon on the Mount:

'Behold the birds of the air, for they neither sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not you of much more value than they?' ... (Matt. 6:26 *ff.*).

'The Lord is faithful in all His words and holy in all His works. The Lord lifteth up all that fall; and setteth up all that are cast down. The eyes of all hope in Thee, O Lord; and Thou givest them meat in due season. Thou openest Thy hand; and fillest with blessing every living creature' ... (Ps. 144:13 *ff.*).

'God so loved the world as to give His only begotten Son' (John 3:16).

'He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how hath He not also, with Him, given us all things?' (Rom. 8:32).

What can we say about God's *Beauty* beyond the fact that it is absolute? He is not just beautiful: He is Beauty. It is so excelling that it encompasses and immeasurably surpasses all other beauty. St Thomas maintained that beauty included three conditions: (1) Integrity or perfection; (2) Proportion or harmony; (3) Brightness or clarity. It is not difficult to see that God is each of them to an infinite degree. Having written of the fire, the wind, the nimble air, the wheeling stars, the tempestuous waves, the sun and the moon, the Wise Man asks: 'What of Him who is master of them all; what excellence must be His, the author of all beauty?' (Wis. 13:1-3). Beauty is described as God's escort and His clothing (Pss. 95:6; 103:1).

GOD IS UNCHANGEABLE

God is absolutely unchangeable. Change means going from one condition to another. That God cannot do this is stated in the original Nicene Creed (A.D. 325), which condemns those who allege that 'the Son of God is mutable or subject to change'. Holy Scripture is very clear: 'The Father of lights, with whom there is no change nor shadow of alteration' (Jas. 1:17). 'Thou shalt abide and all things shall grow old like a garment. Like raiment Thou changest them and They are changed; but Thou art the same and Thy years have no end' (Ps. 101:27-28). (*Cf.* also Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:17; Is. 46:10; Ps. 32:11.)

Does not God change when, for example, He creates? No. Change implies having something you had not before or losing something you had. A teacher does not lose or gain anything in his nature by giving a lesson; so God neither loses nor gains when He creates. He cannot because, as we have seen, He is infinite Being, incapable of division, of losing or gaining anything. Creation is not a new activity for God. When the universe, wonderful as it is, comes into existence, God does not receive a new perfection.

He cannot; He is already absolute Perfection. He simply enters on a new realization of His Will's eternal resolve. The decree of creation is in fact identical with God's nature (there are no parts in God), eternal as His Nature is eternal, free as His Will is free, unchangeable as His Being is unchangeable. The same applies to God hearing our prayer and any other appearance of change in Him. God is changelessly whatever He is in any respect. As St Augustine said: '“The Being” is a name which means unchangeableness. For whatever changes ceases to be what it was and begins to be what it was not. The “True Being”, the “Genuine Being”, is possessed only by Him who does not change’.

GOD IS SPACELESS

Now we come to consider two of God's attributes which will help us to understand His nature more clearly – His immensity and His eternity. It will be easier to take immensity first. At once you think of space – and immensity is spacelessness. We are bound to believe that *God is immensely or absolute spaceless*. We find it in the Athanasian Creed of the 5th or 6th century: 'The Father has immensity, the Son has immensity, and the Holy Spirit has immensity. The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal. Nevertheless, there are not three eternal beings . . . nor three beings having immensity, but one’.

‘If Heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee, how much less this house’, prayed Solomon (3 Kings 8:27). ‘There is only one God who encompasses everything, while He alone cannot be encompassed’, wrote Hermas in the second century.

How is God immense? The thought of your soul's presence in your body may help. It has no parts; wherever it operates – in your ear or your toe – it is wholly present. So God is whole and entire wherever He is. Really space has nothing to do with immensity. We may imagine God in His creation, but He has no limits. Wherever He is, say in the most inconceivably small point, He is whole and entire, just as if there were no point at all. Of course, He is everywhere present in created space, as the writer of the 138th Psalm so vividly describes and St Paul preached: ‘God is not

far from every one of us; for in Him we live and move and are’ (Acts 17:27). He is present by His power, by His knowledge, and by His Being. In all things, even created spiritual beings (angels, devils, and human souls), He is present in His Being, whole and entire.

GOD IS ETERNAL

Apply these same ideas to eternity. Just as you will understand God's immensity best by stripping it of space, so you will understand His eternity best by stripping it of time. Time has nothing to do with it. *God is eternal*. The Psalmist tells us He had neither beginning nor end: ‘Before the mountains were made or the earth and the world were formed; from eternity to eternity thou art God’ (Ps. 89:2). But having no beginning nor end is not the essence of eternity. Boethius, who died in 524, gave the classical definition: *Aeternitas est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*. Eternity is the perfect possession of unending life all at once. The important words are *tota simul*, all at once. They mean that God does not have life bit by bit as we do. It is all His in one act. When I began writing this booklet I had not the life that I have now; nor have I now the life I had then. Everything created has life in bits; but in God there are no parts. So He has His life all at once, as an infinitely perfect unchangeable *now*, with no succession or duration, no past or future, no movement or interruption, no beginning or end. Eternity is not made up of time. That God lives in this constant undivided *now* is implied in two famous places in Scripture: ‘Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten Thee’ (Ps. 2:7); and Our Lord's ‘Before Abraham came to be, I am’ (Jn. 8:58). St Peter told his new converts never to forget that time is not the same with God as it is with us – to Him a day may be a thousand years and a thousand years only a day (2 Pet. 3:8). St Augustine, for whom eternity was always ‘the great thought’, wrote: ‘The eternity of God is His essence itself, which has nothing changeable in it. In it there is nothing past, as if it were no longer, nothing future, as if it had not yet been. In it there is only “is” – that is, the present’. (Cf. also Rom. 11:33; Ps. 138:6.)

GOD'S KNOWLEDGE AND WILL

God is a living God, said the Vatican Council, following Holy Writ. 'In God, life and being are not two different things, but being and life are one and the same', wrote St Augustine. Knowing and willing are the most perfect forms of life; so we must think a little now about God's knowledge and His will.

His knowledge is infinite; He is 'the Lord of all knowledge' whose wisdom is without measure (1 Kings 2:3; Ps. 146:5). God has made us who know; therefore He must have knowledge – but whatever God has, He is . . . So He *is* Knowledge and there is nothing which can limit His knowledge. The indescribable order and purposefulness of the universe demand a Creator of highest intelligence.

When God knows He does not pass from not knowing something to knowing it as we do. He does not know successively, by passing from premisses to conclusion or from one thing to another. He knows everything in one single indivisible act. He is Himself knowledge. He completely encompasses His infinite knowledge and in that way fully comprehends Himself, so St Paul could write: 'The Spirit searcheth all things, the deep things of God' (1 Cor. 2:10).

It is far beyond the scope of a small booklet like this to treat exhaustively of God's knowledge. All I can hope to do is to outline the Church's teaching. Thus, it is of faith that *God knows all that is merely possible* (cf. Est. 14:14; 1 Cor. 2:10), *all real things in the past, the present and the future* (cf. Ps. 146:4; Ps. 49:11; Job 28:24 ff.; Eccles. 1:2 ff.; Matt. 6:26 ff.; 10:29 ff.; Acts 15:8; Ps. 7:10; 1 Par. 28:9; Ps. 68:6; Ps. 138:1–6; 3 Kings 8:39), and *He also foresees with infallible certainty all the things which angels and men will do freely in the future* (cf. Ps. 138:3 ff.; John 6:65).

The fact that God knows in advance does not take away our freedom. Here is what St Augustine wrote:

'As you through your remembrance do not oblige that which is past to have occurred, so God, through His foreknowledge, does not compel that which shall be in the future to happen'.

It is commonly believed that with infallible certainty God knows the things we might choose to do but might have done under other circumstances. There is an example of this in Our Lord's words to Corozain and Bethsaida (Matt. 11:21).

The books which have been written about God's Will fill many libraries. Here are the general principles. *The divine will is infinite, the final foundation of all the order in creation and the supreme standard of morality*. 'Whatever the Lord pleases, He does in heaven and on earth, in the sea and in all the deeps' (Ps. 134:6). When He spoke to us during His earthly life He told us to pray: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt. 6:10).

GOD'S LOVE

God's affections correspond to His infinite nature. The basic one is love, which is identical with His being: 'God is charity' (1 John 4:8). Because of His absolute holiness God hates sin, but there can be in Him no enmity towards the person of the sinner (cf. Ps. 5:7; Wis. 11:25). In religious literature other affections are attributed to God – sadness, hope, longing, anger, etc. – but we must understand them as merely human analogous terms, the writers doing their best to describe God with the limited language at their disposal. Anger, for example, cannot be a passion in God like human anger but it is used to express, as we see it, either His hatred of sin, His aversion from (not enmity towards) a sinner, His justice seen as punishing offenders or the results of that justice. Thus sinners are called 'children of wrath', men liable to divine punishment (Eph. 2:3; 1 Thess. 5:9; Rom. 9:22).

Because He is Goodness without limit God is, of His very nature, bound to love first of all Himself. He is the final reason and cause of all He has made: 'The Lord hath made all things for Himself' (Prov. 16:4). Freely He brought all creatures into existence; He loves them all in Himself: 'Thou lovest all things that are, and hatest none of those things which Thou hast made' (Wis. 11:25). God does not love His creatures because they are good; His love is the cause of their goodness: 'In this is charity; not as though we had loved God but because He hath first loved

us' (1 John 4:10). Within God love is always infinite but its effect varies according to the loveliness of the creature concerned.

The major question of the relationship of God's will to evil has been dealt with very fully elsewhere.⁴ All I can say here is that God cannot of Himself desire physical evil for the evil's sake or as an aim, but He does will physical, natural and punitive evils for the sake of the good which, in His infinite wisdom, He knows will come from them (*cf.* Wis. 1:13 *ff.*; Ecclus. 11:14; 39:35; Amos 3:6). God cannot will moral evil, that is sin, in itself or as a means to an end; He permits it because He respects the free will He has given to men and because He has the wisdom and power to draw good out of all evil (*cf.* Ps. 5:5; Ecclus. 15:15 *ff.*; Gen. 50:20). The hardening of a man in evil, spoken of in Scripture, is a punishment, the withdrawal of grace (*cf.* Exod. 4:21; Rom. 9:18).

GOD IS ALMIGHTY

God is almighty, the Lord of the heavens and of the earth. Practically all the creeds profess their belief in His all-powerfulness. Holy Writ stresses it continuously; it is one of the divine attributes most frequently mentioned. In fact, God is given a special name, *El*, the Strong One. 'I acknowledge that Thou canst do everything and that no purpose can be withholden from Thee', confessed Job (Job 42:2). Nothing is impossible for God (*cf.* Matt. 19:26; 3:9; Luke 1:37). God's power is identical with His nature, therefore He cannot do what would be contradictory to His nature. For example, He cannot change, lie, make something that has happened not to happen, or realize what is contradictory in itself (a square circle). There are many possible world orders which God might have made, but He freely chose one from amongst those known to His infinite wisdom. He has, of course, created the best possible world order – His supernatural kingdom. Our present earthly life is a condition for the realization of the perfect life. It is a probation

⁴*The Problem of Evil*, by Rev. M. C. D'Arcy S.J. (C.T.S. 6d), which the reader is advised to study.

which enables us to attain the perfect life. Suppose this probationary period did not exist, a heaven into which we had been put irrespective of our free wills would not be the best possible world. To live for ever in God's presence because by His grace we have merited it by using our free will rightly, is more perfect than to possess such a life without having merited it.

God's dominion is supreme; all creatures must acknowledge it. In practice that means religion – accepting God's revelation, keeping His commandments and worshipping Him as well as we can. We must have a reverential fear of God (Jer. 5:22; 10:10); believe that He will keep His promises faithfully (Gen. 17:1 *ff.*; 35:11 *ff.*; Num. 11:23), and trust Him (1 Kings 14:6; Ps. 145:5). Remember how the mother of the Machabees proclaimed her belief in God's power as she encouraged her youngest son to suffer death rather than give up his faith (2 Mach. 7:28). Our Lord in Gethsemane appealed to the omnipotence of His Father: 'Father, all things are possible to thee' (Mk. 14:36; *cf.* Rom. 9:19; Eph. 1:5–13; 3:2).

GOD IS JUSTNESS

God is infinitely just. He is infinite Justness. He rewards good and punishes evil according to merit; He wills that all the requirements of the moral order He has established be fulfilled. He is the ultimate criterion of all justice. We must believe that when God freely created the world He was bound by His infinite wisdom and goodness to give to His creatures all they need to achieve their purpose.

Nowadays there is a tendency to think of punishment only as a means of improving people or of warning them. God's punishment of sinners is to bring about just retribution for the insult sin offers to Him and the disturbance of the moral order He has set up. On the other hand, it would be wrong to believe that God owes it to His justice never to forgive sin until full atonement has been made. Remember that there is no authority above God; He owes nothing to any other being; He has absolute right to forgive the sins of the repentant sinner, even without any atonement.

GOD IS MERCY

God is infinitely merciful. Mercy may be defined as the property by which God shows His kindness towards men in their sorrows and afflictions and especially towards repentant sinners. Every page of the Scriptures and many prayers of the Church's liturgy express belief in God's mercy. In fact, no attribute is more in evidence. Its manifestation reaches a climax in His coming amongst us as man to suffer and die that we might live with Him for ever. The Jews regarded their history as a chain of God's blessings and favours, proofs of His mercy. They spoke of it as being immeasurably great (e.g. Ps. 50:3), all-embracing (Ps. 144:9), inexhaustible (Ps. 29:6), a free gift (Exod. 33:19), and enduring for ever (1 Par. 16:34; Is. 54:10; Pss. 117; 135). It embraces all men, the just, the suffering, the oppressed, and particularly repentant sinners. In the Gospels Our Lord's parables, His teaching, His works, and the sacrifice of Himself, are all eloquent testimony of God's boundless mercy. When He designates God as 'the Father of mercies' (2 Cor. 1:3) and as 'rich in mercy' (Eph. 2:4), St Paul sums up all the Old Testament had to say about this attribute.

Mercy and justice are wonderfully bound together in God. All His ways 'are mercy and truth' (Ps. 24:10). Why does God give us natural and supernatural favours? Because of His love and mercy. He not only rewards and punishes but rewards merit beyond its deserts (Matt. 19:29 – a hundredfold) and punishes less than is deserved. St Thomas wrote: 'Even in the damnation of the reprobate mercy is seen, which, though it does not totally remit, yet somehow alleviates in punishing short of what is deserved. In the justification of sinners justice is seen, when God remits sins on account of love, although it is He Himself who has mercifully infused that love. So we read of Magdalen: 'Many sins are forgiven her because she hath loved much' (Lk. 7:47). Still, even when God forgives, He shows His justice because He demands from the sinner repentance and atonement. The perfect identity of mercy and justice in God finds its climax in Our Lord's death:

'God so loved the world as to give His only begotten Son; that whosoever believeth in Him may not perish, but may have life everlasting . . . Christ Jesus, whom God hath proposed to be a propitiation, through faith in His blood, to the showing of His justice for the remission of former sins, through the forbearance of God, for the showing of His justice in this time; that He himself may be just' (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 3:25).

In the mercy of God we see not only His infinite love and goodness, but also His power and majesty: 'Thou hast mercy on all because Thou canst do all things' (Wis. 11:24). The Church which prays, 'O God, whose mercy is beyond telling and whose goodness is an infinite treasure', also prays, 'O God, who displayest Thy almighty power chiefly by showing mercy and forbearance'.

Holy Writ reminds us that if we wish to enjoy God's mercy we must seek it (Deut. 4:29, 31), continue to serve God humbly in time of trouble (Judith 8:16 *ff.*), be docile in accepting His punishments (Ecclus. 18:13 *ff.*; Prov. 3:11 *ff.*; Ps. 118:73), learn His will, repent of evil and amend our lives (Ps. 50:3, 19; Prov. 28:13; Ecclus. 17:20). Above all, we ought to pray for mercy.

'Withhold not Thy mercies from me, O Lord; may Thy grace and Thy faithfulness guard me always; hear me, O Lord, for Thy mercy is kind; look upon me according to the bounteousness of Thy pity; let Thy mercy be at hand to comfort me; let Thy tender mercies come to me; it is not for our justification that we present our prayers before Thy face, but for the multitude of Thy tender mercies' (Ps. 39:12, 68:17, 118:76; Dan. 9:18).

All that I have written about God emphasizes how utterly wrong is the widespread modern tendency to think of Him as Something rather than as Someone. Elsewhere I have tried to explain how God is not one but three Persons.⁵ If we try to think of Him as infinite personal life, who not only has perfections but *is* every perfection without limit, and who not only has supreme power over us but loves us with limitless, merciful love far in excess of whatever the human mind can imagine, we shall have little difficulty in falling down in adoration before Him. We must

⁵ *The Blessed Trinity and the Life of the Soul* (C.T.S. 6d).

worship Him not primarily for what He has done for us but for what He is in Himself. If, with Francis Thompson, we can pray:

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee,

we should not forget the parallel picture painted in words the poet attributes to God –

My child, give me thy heart!
For I have loved thee with a love
No mortal heart can show;
A love so deep, my saints in heaven
Its depths can never know.

(ADELAIDE PROCTER: *Give Me Thy Heart*)

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